

Water scarcity could help Brussels build meaningful relations with Tehran



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The bigger picture that the EU needs to consider if it wants to devise an effective and comprehensive strategy towards Iran is one of a country facing a fundamental political, economic, environmental, societal, and demographic crisis,

July turned out to be “Earth’s hottest month”. Places like Phoenix and Beijing, located on nearly opposite sides of the globe, suffered from the same heat event.

In a world with growing potential for military conflict, these very tangible effects of climate change should remind friends and foes just how closely connected they are.

One place, however, stands out: Iran. The country is not only hit hard by global warming but also run by a regime that thrives on regional instability and enmity with the West.

Dealing with the Islamic Republic will therefore be decisive for how to address global challenges even with unfriendly actors more broadly.

However, as the polarised, toxic debate in the US does not allow for nuances, the European Union and its member states have to come up with such policy innovation.

Obviously, that’s easier said than done, given that the EU over the past year has hardened its stance vis-à-vis Tehran over a number of issues.

Iran’s drone supply to Russia, used for indiscriminate attacks on Ukrainian cities, tops this list, followed closely by the regime’s crackdown on popular dissent, its stalling on the nuclear negotiations, and — though much less in the public’s view — its overt hostage-taking of dual nationals to extract concessions.

None of this makes the Islamic Republic a particularly pleasant actor to deal with, let alone one to provide with any benefits from cooperation.

At the same time, EU member states do have interests in the region that require a minimum of, yes, give-and-take.

Simply shunning the regime, as some demanded in response to the most recent revolt, neither improves the country's human rights record nor can it undo the nuclear or other threats.

Water scarcity is compounding Iran's woes

This is where the climate kicks in: while Southern Europe has struggled with an immense heat wave this summer, Iran has suffered from record-breaking temperatures.

Both here and there, increased evaporation due to rising temperatures and decreasing groundwater levels, coupled with poor water management and increased water use for crops, energy, and industry, lead to widespread shortages.

In early August, the Iranian government imposed a COVID-style nationwide shutdown in response to the extreme heat — while Italy considers a pandemic-like furlough scheme for those working outside.

Water scarcity, it appears, is a matter that links — and compounds — many other policy issues plaguing Iran in particular.



Farmers attend a protest demanding authorities open a dam to relieve drought-stricken areas of central province of Isfahan, November 2021 Hamidreza Nikoomaram/AP

So far, violent clashes have been rare but did occur in Iran — fairly frequently, for example in Khuzestan and Isfahan — and Europe (more seldom, but earlier this year in France).

Not coincidentally, it is the province of Sistan and Baluchistan in Eastern Iran on the border with Pakistan that has seen the most sustained protests over the months following the death of Mahsa Amini last September — and which, according to the country's lawmakers, will run out of water by mid-September.

Water scarcity, it appears, is a matter that links — and compounds — many other policy issues plaguing Iran in particular.

Protecting cronies will be Tehran regime's undoing

It saps economic growth in a society whose erstwhile youth bulb is growing older just as birth rates decline and emigration grows, due to high unemployment as much as political repression.

It also pits groups of society, rural and urban, farmers and consumers, against one another when both ethnic tensions and a core-periphery divide create instability.

Clientelist water policies favouring cronies in the political establishment and the security apparatus... have helped turn the population against a political system built on religious zeal and the suppression of women.



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a ceremony commemorating the death anniversary of the late revolutionary founder Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran, June 2023AP/Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader

Moreover, clientelist water policies favouring cronies in the political establishment and the security apparatus, which again control much of the country's infrastructure — think of dams for electricity generation — and industry (like chemicals, steel, and refineries), have helped turn the population against a political system built on religious zeal and the suppression of women.

This, at a moment when a leadership succession is most likely only years away, given Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's high age — he's 84 — and poor health, at least according to frequent speculations.

Tying its fate with Russia against the West

And that's before looking at the regional picture, where skirmishes with Afghanistan, disputes with Iraq and Turkey over transboundary water flows, and the threat of war with Israel over the country's nuclear program outweigh Tehran's yet-untested recent rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.

Globally, the Islamic Republic has tied its fate to Russia and China to better confront "the West", though the resultant economic and political dependencies do little to ease that country's many environmental woes.

The bigger picture that the EU needs to consider if it wants to devise an effective and comprehensive strategy towards Iran is one of a country facing a fundamental political, economic, environmental, societal, and demographic crisis.



Commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Force Gen. Kioumars Heidari waves among Iran-made drones, May 2023AP/AP

Therefore, the bigger picture that the EU needs to consider if it wants to devise an effective and comprehensive strategy towards Iran is one of a country facing a fundamental political, economic, environmental, societal, and demographic crisis.

Still, rather than hope for the regime's rather-sooner-than-later demise, the EU should look for ways to cooperate on shared challenges — for the benefit of tackling these as much as in the interest of establishing ties into an otherwise closed society.

Water might be the reason to build bridges

Admitting to its own struggles with the effects of climate change, such as increasing water scarcity, goes a long way to addressing urgent environmental needs at eye level.

An open dialogue on regenerative processes that will tangibly benefit Iran's society and economy could help create a basis for trust that is otherwise lacking.



People rest under an arch of the 400-year-old Si-o-seh Pol bridge that now spans a dried up Zayandeh Roud river in Isfahan, July 2018Vahid Salemi/Copyright 2018 The AP. All rights reserved.

It would also allow engagement with government actors, both national and local, as well as international organisations in the country while bringing in civil society and academia.

Such efforts would help the EU develop its nascent water diplomacy into an operational approach that could be applied to other world regions.

It would also serve as a template for dealing with other antagonist regimes of relevance to Europe, by identifying a policy area for non-ideological, human needs-based cooperation.

Given the situation around Iran is representative of the geopolitical conflicts to come, ending the current stalemate and engaging in meaningful cooperation would serve the EU well in its quest to become a relevant actor at the global level.

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